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Connecticut Taxpayers Beware Legislature Poised to Scrap Constitutional Spending Cap



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“Your life, liberty and property are not safe while the legislature is in session.”

This age-old saying describing an inherent mistrust of mischievous legislatures reminds us that our founding fathers were indeed wise in their understanding of governments.

This year the General Assembly may well give renewed meaning to this old Yankee warning by ending even the pretense of abiding by a constitutional spending cap.

Connecticut’s spending cap was adopted by an overwhelming 80 percent of the voters in a 1992 statewide referendum. The constitutional spending cap was offered as a protection against runaway state spending following the imposition of a state income tax on us that year. In simple terms, the cap provided that the legislature cannot expand spending (with narrow exceptions) by more than the increase in personal income or the rate of inflation, whichever is greater.

Since its adoption however, successive legislatures have purposefully ignored and thwarted the will of Connecticut voters by failing to adopt the cap as a constitutional provision. Instead, we have operated under loose statutory rules that can, and have been surmounted.

The disdain shown by the legislature should infuriate, though not necessarily surprise, Connecticut residents.

The latest attempt to remove any check on unfettered spending is put forward in the name of “maximizing” federal revenue. This year the legislature will consider imposing a Nursing Facility User Fee (SB707), an issue that may be a legitimate one for debate on its own merit. However the proposal is tied to exempting the related spending increase from the spending cap. It is true that imposing such a tax would provide for some increase in federal reimbursement for nursing home costs.

Because the legislature has already pushed our state budget to the edge of the current cap rules (and toward fiscal insolvency), the implementation of this new tax will lead to an arbitrary change in the cap rules, not to mention that pesky little problem of violating the will of Connecticut voters.

This proposal to “maximize revenue” is in reality nothing more than an attempt by the legislature to be relieved from any spending restraint. It will not resolve our budget crisis but instead perpetuate our boom-and-bust budget cycles. Instead of asking for more accountability on how our tax dollars are spent, this proposal is a license to spend more. Instead of creating a climate that would protect Connecticut jobs, this measure would jeopardize them.

Many of my constituents often ask in disbelief, “How can we be in this fiscal mess?”

After all, now we have an income tax, we have the lottery revenues, we have the casino revenues. The state has increased taxes by \$1 billion in the last two years. Indeed, I have grown up in a generation where Connecticut residents have seen new and increased taxes on just about every activity in their life from the moment they wake until the moment they go to sleep.

It is unimaginable to me that we would fail to learn from the budget debacle of 1991 or the most recent fiscal crisis of 2001-03 that we have lived through. This legislature must obey the will of Connecticut residents and implement the spending cap as a CONSTITUTIONAL provision. I have once again introduced legislation to do so. The citizens of this state should demand no less.

The critical program that is preserved by creating a solvent, sustainable state budget could well affect your children, your parents or your neighbors. The job you save by ending growth destroying tax increases may well be your own. The tax dollars you save by stopping an unrestrained legislature will most certainly be your own.

Rep. Kevin DelGobbo serves the 70th Assembly District of Naugatuck in the State House of Representatives.